**[DARK KNIGHT RETURNS LITERARY ANALYSIS:](http://nightwing45-writerscorner.blogspot.com/2008/10/dark-knight-returns-literary-analysis.html)**

**-Michael Edwards**

Twenty Two years ago Frank Miller gave birth to the possible ending of the Pre-Crisis Batman. A wonderful Noir story that was filled satirical political allusions and over the top violence that bordered on the exaggerated.  
  
The story depicts Bruce Wayne -- the Batman giving up his role after the death of Jason Todd the second Robin. Which leads to years of alcohol abuse and self-destructive behavior. It is eluded by Miller that Batman blames himself for Todd's death and that is why he gave up the crusade. Which jibes with what has been portrayed of the Batman and Robin relationship in All-Star Batman and Robin and The Dark Knight Strikes Again. Of course, the whole story is not over the woes of Batman's guilt. No, Gotham City in this bleak government controlled future is plagued by a worse criminal element then before. The Mutants - a gang of unruly and corrupt teenagers lead by a massively strong sadist. But that isn't the only problem. Batman's old enemy Two Face also terrorizes the city. Realizing that his personal demons can never be laid to rest Batman returns to his crusade and dispatches Two Face and while battling the Mutants he gains a new Robin in the form of Carrie Kelly. And that's just the tip of the iceberg as the Joker returns along with a thrown down between the Caped Crusader and the Man of Steel.   
  
The Dark Knight Returns was innovative not for only it's brilliant storytelling techniques, but its depiction of a Batman who bordered on the obsessive due to the trauma he faced as a child. Not to mention the scathing lampooning of such figures as Ronald Reagan, David Letterman, and Dr. Ruth. And Miller's criticizing the Cold War politics such as brinkmanship and the existence of a powerful military-industrial complex.  
  
While Miller is not as regarded in the industry as he once was. He has proven he is still at the top of his game with movies such as Sin City and 300 raking in hundreds of millions of dollars. If I had any advice for those wanting to become Film Noir comic writers. Look no further than the master of Film Noir that is Frank Miller.

[Batman: The Dark Knight Returns](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1563893428/thecomictread-20) by Frank Miller with Klaus Janson (inks) and Lynn Varley (colorist) is rightfully one of the most famous comic stories to have ever been published. It is an “imaginary” tale set in the future when society’s decline forces Batman to come out of retirement in a world where super-heroes are no longer publicly active. What I remember most about it when it first came out was the impact it had on making comics respectable among people who wouldn’t ordinarily give comics a second thought. Comics still have a long way to go, but 18 years ago it was unthinkable that mainstream cultural magazines like Entertainment Weekly (yes, I know it wasn’t around in 1986, but you get the idea) would have a regular feature reviewing comics alongside popular movies, television shows, music and books.

When I read it again to discuss it here on the Treadmill, I found it to still be a captivating story but it was less impressive than I remembered it. I know why. This was an innovative series with a fresh look at the Batman mythos, but it spawned zillions of knock-offs, including the overflow of grim, gritty comics of the late 80’s and early 90’s to the point where many of the innovations are now painfully overused clichés. But that’s not the fault of this series. It is a brilliant tale.

As this series has been deservedly the subject of analysis all over the web, I’m not going to get too deep here. I will direct you to [this link](http://blog.peiratikos.net/citations/comics/batman-the-dark-knight-returns/) for one of my favorite discussion runs. You can also get on board with [Mike Sterling](http://progressiveruin.com/archives/2004_03_21_archive.html), who has a good point in calling the series a black comedy.

Just so I don’t get accused of ducking the question, here’s my take on the series: The elements of a dark comedy are certainly all in place, but I don’t think you can say this is no more than a dark comedy. I think Miller was trying to write the definitive Batman story in the context of the social and political climate of the world as it existed in 1986. Miller’s conclusion is that everybody loves to talk, but nobody listens and that way lies a barren future where sound bite thoughts serve as the basis for inevitable warfare. Super-heroes can’t help. Those with powers either flee the society (Green Lantern), become its tools (Superman) through misguided fear of harming humanity’s development or become the stubborn and feared voice of reason (Batman) that no one will hear, futilely attempting to force the concept of justice back on society. In other words, no matter how super the power, it can’t overcome humanity’s slide into ignorance.

That’s my take anyway. Getting back to the storytelling mechanics, here are some of the things that helped make this series great:

1. The cover to issue 1. A contender in any list for the top comics’ covers of all times;
2. The mocking, burning Joker corpse in issue 4. It still scares me;
3. The TV commentary talking head panels and how Miller used that device to present the different factions in the story. A fantastic way to make the tale flow. That said, I’ve seen it so often since, that if I don’t read a story using this device for a couple years, I’ll be happy;
4. The female Robin – a ray of sunshine in the Jason Todd era of Robin and the only character in the story who provided any hope for the future in Miller’s gloomy vision;
5. The depiction of the Wayne murders. A scene that has been presented so many times, it is hard to get worked up about, but this one had impact;
6. The new Batmobile. A tank. A genius of a revamp. Its’ first appearance on the scene still gives me goosebumps;
7. Superman as the tool of manipulative leaders. It was a mind-boggling idea the first time it was presented, which was here;
8. Joker snapping his own neck. Best death scene in comics. Ever.
9. Superman’s line: “We must not remind them that giants walk the earth”
10. Green Arrow’s appearance for the story’s climax. Proof that the guy who for years was a vanilla Batman knock-off has come into his own as a viable character.

It wasn’t perfect though. Here’s a list of things I didn’t like:

1. The overuse of the mutants/Sons of Batman. Far too much time on repetitive scenes;
2. That the fact that Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson hadn’t spoken in 7 years didn’t get more play. A definitive Batman tale without Dick Grayson?
3. The fight scenes between Batman and the mutant leader. Far too out of character for Batman to forego the advantage for a chance to get his fists dirty;
4. Superman as the tool of manipulative leaders. Because it has been reused too often ever since. It was a clever interpretation of what might happen to Superman in the “real world”. It has since been made a part of Superman’s character in too many storylines. Superman as an easily manipulated idiot is interesting once or twice, but annoying after that;
5. Alfred’s death at the end. Didn’t seem necessary or pack any punch. I know it was just an “imaginary tale” as it were, but Miller is too good a writer to kill an old character without dramatic reason or impact.

**Black Comedy (from Wikipedia)**

**Black comedy** is a sub-genre of [comedy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy) and [satire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satire) in which topics and events that are usually regarded as [taboo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taboo) are treated in a satirical or humorous manner while retaining their seriousness. [Synonyms](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synonyms) include **dark comedy**, **black humor**, **dark humor**, and **morbid humor**.

## [[edit](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Black_comedy&action=edit&section=1)] Humor

The purpose of black comedy is to make light of serious and often taboo subject matter, and some comedians use it as a tool for exploring important issues, thus provoking discomfort and serious thought, as well as amusement, in their audience. Popular themes of the genre include [rape](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape), [murder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder), [suicide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suicide), [war](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War), [terminal illness](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terminal_illness), [abuse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abuse), [insanity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insanity), [disease](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disease) and [crime](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime). By contrast, [blue comedy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_comedy) focuses more on crude topics, such as [sex](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex) and [bodily fluids](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodily_fluids).

Although the two are interrelated, black comedy is different from straightforward [obscenity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obscenity) in that it is more subtle and doesn't necessarily have an explicit intention to offend; black comedy should be contrasted with [obscenity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obscenity). In obscene humor, much of the humorous element comes from shock and revulsion, while black comedy usually includes an element of [irony](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irony), or even [fatalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatalism). This particular brand of humor can be exemplified by a scene in the play [*Waiting for Godot*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waiting_for_Godot): a man takes off his belt to hang himself, and his trousers fall down.

Writers such as [William Faulkner](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Faulkner), [Thomas Pynchon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Pynchon), [Kurt Vonnegut](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_Vonnegut), [Joseph Heller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Heller), [Mark Twain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Twain), [Louis-Ferdinand Céline](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis-Ferdinand_C%C3%A9line) and [George Bernard Shaw](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Bernard_Shaw) have written novels, stories, plays and songs in which profound or horrific events were portrayed in a comic manner. Comedians including [George Carlin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Carlin), [Bill Hicks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Hicks), [Frankie Boyle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frankie_Boyle), and the [Monty Python](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monty_Python) team have also helped popularize the genre.

## [[edit](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Black_comedy&action=edit&section=2)] Genre

In the United States, black comedy as a literary genre came to prominence in the 1950s and 1960s. An anthology edited by [Bruce Jay Friedman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce_Jay_Friedman), titled *Black Humor*, assembles many examples of the genre.

According to screenwriter [John Truby](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Truby), when black comedy is used as a basis for a story's plotline, it involves a society in an unhealthy state and a main character wanting something that will not be beneficial to himself or society. The audience should usually be able to see this for themselves, and often a supporting character within the story also sees the insanity of the situation. The main character rarely, if ever, learns a lesson or undergoes any significant change from the ordeal, but sometimes a relatively sane course of action is offered to them.

Black comedy is a prevalent theme of many cult films, television shows and video games. The 1964 film [*Dr. Strangelove*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dr._Strangelove) presents one of the best-known mainstream examples of black comedy. The subject of the film is [nuclear warfare](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuclear_warfare) and the [annihilation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annihilation) of life on Earth. Normally, dramas about nuclear war treat the subject with gravity and seriousness, creating suspense over the efforts to avoid a nuclear war. But *Dr. Strangelove* plays the subject for laughs; for example, in the film, the fail-safe procedures designed to prevent a nuclear war are precisely the systems that ensure that it will happen. Plotwise, Group Captain Mandrake serves as the one sane character in the decayed society, and Major Kong fills the role of the hero striving for a harmful goal.

In modern standards, black comedy is commonly used in dramatic or satirical films, retaining its serious tone. Examples include [*Full Metal Jacket*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Full_Metal_Jacket), [*The Twelve Chairs*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Twelve_Chairs_%281970_film%29), [*Fargo*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fargo_%28film%29), [*Being There*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Being_There_%28film%29), [*Brazil*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brazil_%28film%29), [*Network*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Network_%28film%29), [*Shallow Grave*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shallow_Grave), [*Natural Born Killers*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_Born_Killers), and [*Burn After Reading*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burn_After_Reading).

In television, examples include sitcoms ([*M\*A\*S\*H*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M*A*S*H), [*Blackadder*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackadder), [*Nighty Night*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nighty_Night)) sketch comedies ([*The League of Gentlemen*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_League_of_Gentlemen), [*Jam*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jam_%28TV_series%29)), animations ([*Monkey Dust*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monkey_Dust), [*Metalocalypse*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metalocalypse)), open satire ([*The Day Today*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Day_Today), [*Brass Eye*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brass_Eye)), and dramas ([*Dexter*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dexter_%28TV_series%29)*,* [*The Addams Family*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Addams_Family_%28TV_series%29)*).*